



2020

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Recommended Citation

Chhay, Kassandra (2020) "Book Review: Mortland, C. (2017). *Grace After Genocide: Cambodians in the United States*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1202

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol15/iss1/2>

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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Vol. 15 Iss. 1 (2020)

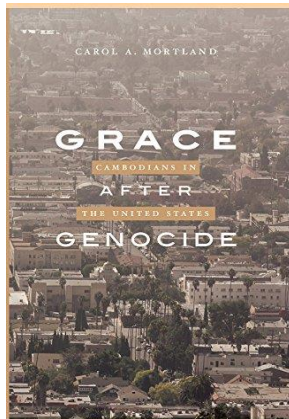
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Book Review: Mortland, C. (2017). *Grace After Genocide: Cambodians in the United States*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books. 300 pp. ISBN: 978-1785334702.

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In *Grace After Genocide: Cambodians in the United States*, Carol Mortland, draws on over three decades of ethnographic research on Cambodian American lives. In this book, Mortland also includes her own previous research detailing the lives of Cambodian refugees in Tacoma, Washington. Overall, *Grace after Genocide* contributes importantly to the literature on Cambodian Americans. Along similar lines of works by Sucheng Chan (2004), Ebihara (1994), and Welaratna (1993), Mortland's volume offers a comprehensive examination of the challenges Cambodia refugees and their children face in their journey toward Khmer cultural preservation and straddling the American mainstream culture (Chan 2004; Ebihara et al., 1994; Welaratna, 1993).

The author describes how the U.S. Cambodian Americans are shaped by language barrier, socioeconomic status, and knowledge on the American culture. Mortland dedicates the book to "survivors and victims of the Cambodian holocaust." Although Cambodian and Holocaust victims and survivors both share genocidal experiences, I worry that invoking the term *holocaust* moves away from acknowledging Khmer people and culture and the particular historical context of the Cambodian genocide. The United States was indirectly involved with the genocide by supporting the anti-communist movement during the Cambodian Civil War. The Lon Nol regime was fighting against the communist regimes of the Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese. Under President Richard Nixon, they approved attacks against the Vietnamese supply line in Cambodia. American support exasperated the tension between the Lon Nol and Khmer Rouge regime fueling the Cambodian genocide. Thus, this U.S. Cambodian history is central to the eventual settlement experiences of Cambodians in the United States and in other nations.

Mortland begins with an overview of why and when Cambodian refugees resettled in the United States. From 1975-1979, the Khmer Rouge occupied the country and attempted to transform Cambodia into an agrarian communist utopia completely free from western influence. Many traditional Khmer practices were forbidden, particularly religion. Formal schooling stopped. Those who opposed the new regime or who were suspected of opposition were tortured and killed. It has



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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement, Vol. 15, Iss. 1, (2020) ISSN: 2153-8999

been estimated that over two million Cambodians died as a result of Khmer Rouge rule. Chapters 2-4 discusses how the United States received an influx of Cambodian refugees. The United States faced an economic crisis after withdrawing from the Vietnam War impacting Americans' perceptions of Cambodians. As echoed by others (Andrist, 1983; Chan, 2004; Krich, 1989), some Americans believed Cambodians were taking away jobs, resources, and opportunities from existing residents. The sentiment was that Cambodians should be thankful for simply being in the United States. Moreover, many Americans viewed them as deficient, thus they were glad to provide assistance. Cambodian refugees received economic and social assistance from church sponsors, refugee programs, social services, as well as from those Cambodians who came to the United States prior to 1975.

In Chapter four: *Resettlement Realities*, the assistance Cambodian newcomers received was hardly enough to assist them with a successful resettlement. As well, Cambodians were unfamiliar with American customs albeit some did receive training on American culture in refugee camps prior to the United States arrival. American schools were not only a place to gain a formal education, it was also a place for Cambodians to learn about how to act and think like an American. For this reader, a further discussion about Cambodians who were sponsored by their families and how their experiences may have differed from church-sponsored Cambodians would have described in more nuanced ways the realities that Cambodians faced. I would have appreciated more recent literature that highlights the experiences of Cambodians across the United States. This would have captured the realities of Cambodians in different communities to expand on the voices of Cambodians represented in the book. Mortland mostly presents the experiences of past participants who she interviewed again since their resettlement in Tacoma.

The subsequent chapters expand on Cambodian Americans' economic and cultural challenges, struggles with family, parents and children relationships and challenges with community, religion, and health. In chapter six, Mortland writes about traditional Cambodians' belief on the role of teachers, in which teachers are responsible to discipline students and parents are not to intervene between their children and teachers. American teachers assumed that Cambodian parents' lack of involvement in school meant that they did not care about their child's education. This cultural misunderstanding amongst teachers perpetuates the stereotype of Cambodian students as academic failures. Chapter eight is a discussion on religion with a focus on Theravada Buddhism, which is the main religion in the Cambodian culture. Some Cambodian communities would use houses as temples because it was less expensive than establishing a registered temple. It was often difficult to recruit monks for the temples because many monks were murdered under the Khmer Rouge regime. Temples were a site for Cambodians to come together to celebrate Khmer holidays, such as Khmer New Year and *Pchum Ben* (Festival of the Dead). Some Cambodians only visit the temples during those two main celebrations because they did not have transportation to visit the temple on a regular basis.

Mortland also discusses Cambodians who converted to Christianity out of respect for their church sponsors and/or who aligned with the values of Christianity. Cambodian parents saw the church as a place that provided their family with exposure to the American culture and a chance to improve their English language skills. This was a fascinating aspect of the refugee experience and I would have appreciated more on how different generations of Cambodians negotiated culture and knowledge, particularly the varied ways that parents sought to preserve and navigate these traditions with their children.

The book's final two chapters address Cambodians' connection to their homeland and how they sought to preserve cultural traditions. This section felt particularly relevant with respect to

more recent political events. Towards the end, Mortland describes a bit about 1.5 generation Cambodian deportees—those who were born in Cambodia and arrived in the United States under the age of thirteen—and their experience with forced migration back to a country that they themselves would not call their *homeland*. These are formerly incarcerated individuals. Again, I wanted more here given the political debates around criminal justice, immigration, and belonging during an election year.

As I was reading, I wondered whether the challenges and struggles Mortland presented applied only to Cambodian adult refugees and not the 2nd generation children. To her credit however, the last paragraph of the book does describe briefly how Cambodian youth programs have attempted to revitalize and maintain Khmer culture in the United States. Overall, *Grace after Genocide* is a significant contribution to Southeast Asian American and diasporic studies. *Grace after Genocide* is a significant contribution to Southeast Asian American and diasporic studies. It is a worthwhile read for audiences interested in learning about Khmer culture, refugee communities, and how newcomers seek home and belonging amidst tension, struggle and hope.

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About the Author



Kassandra Chhay, is a PhD student in the Culture and Teaching program at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. She earned her MA in Anthropology with a Certificate in Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University and her BA in Anthropology with a Minor in Political Science at California State University, Long Beach. She served as a student ambassador for the Asian American Pacific Islander Initiative as part of the California State University Journey of Success Program. Her research interest includes disaggregated educational data, Cambodian American K-16 students' experiences, and national identity of Southeast Asian Americans.



Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Vol.15 Iss.1 (2020)

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